

Explaining the Resurrection
Matt. 28:1-15
April 16, 2006 – Easter Sunday
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A reporter once asked Albert Einstein this question: If you could meet one person in history and ask him or her one question, what would it be? Einstein thought for a moment and said, “I would like to meet Jesus Christ, and I would ask him, ‘Did you really rise from the dead?’”

That’s the \$64,000 question, isn’t it? That’s the reason we’re here this morning; in fact, it’s the reason we’re here every Sunday. Many of us have staked our time, our money, our lives on the answer to that question: Did Jesus really rise from the dead?

I believe I know the answer, but you’d be surprised at how many people struggle with this question, even some of our most faithful, intelligent people. There was an article about the resurrection in our denomination’s magazine, written by a seminary professor. She asked in all seriousness, “Can’t we proclaim ‘Jesus lives’ without having to accept the claims of an empty tomb?” Can we?

In a previous church I served, a man asked if we could have lunch. He was one of the greatest servants in the church and a person I looked up to for his faith and dedication. And while eating pepperoni pizza and breadsticks he said this: “How do you believe in the resurrection? I just can’t bring myself to believe. There has to be a rational explanation.” That’s not a pizza-and-breadsticks kind of question. That’s a pastor’s-office, hushed-tones kind of question. I tried to come up with a “rising dough” analogy, but I’m not sure it worked. A lot of people struggle with this.

That doubt is understandable when we look at the gospel stories, because none of the four gospels describe the resurrection. Mark, Matthew, Luke, John – none of them tell us what happened when Jesus was resurrected. All we are told is the after-effects: the empty tomb, the angel, the frightened women, the appearances of a risen Christ. It’s like a Looney Tunes cartoon where Bugs Bunny is staring down the barrel of Elmer Fudd’s gun. One moment Bugs is there, and the next moment he’s gone, with only a few puffs of smoke and squiggly lines where he used to be. We didn’t see him actually leave; we only see the after-effects.

For some people, the after-effects of the resurrection just aren’t enough. The resurrection is simply unbelievable to scientifically trained minds, inquisitive folks who want cold hard facts, and people who’ve watched too much “CSI.” Because all of these people, and all of us, know the truth: dead men don’t rise. Once put into a grave, bodies don’t usually get up and start moving again, unless you’re in a zombie movie. There’s a finality to death and a lack of evidence that makes the resurrection simply unbelievable.

In fact, the only evidence that we DO have is the empty tomb. Some would say that’s the basis for some faulty logic. We are trying to prove the existence of something by saying what’s not there. If the tomb is empty, then Christ must be risen. But we can’t escape the fact that the tomb is empty, so there must be SOME explanation.

As I read the gospels, there’s more evidence within them stories that point toward the reality of the resurrection than away from it. For example, if the authors had concocted this story to try to perpetuate a myth about resurrection, wouldn’t they have made sure their stories matched? Four students who had skipped class together called

their professor to apologize for missing a test, and they made up a story about the car they were riding having a flat tire on the way to campus. The professor allowed the four of them to make up the exam. When the students sat down to take the test, they each found only one question on the paper: "Which tire was flat?" If you're going to perpetuate a myth, your stories should match, and yet the gospel stories of the resurrection are very different, each highlighting a different aspect of the event.

There's even further evidence for the authenticity of these stories. As we talked about before, women were held in very low esteem in Jewish society. In fact, women were not allowed to testify in court because their honesty and reliability was in question. So, if anyone was going to fabricate a story about the resurrection, why would they have made the first witnesses women? Why are all the men in hiding and the women the ones going to the tomb? Without the women, the news about the empty tomb never gets to the disciples. If you were making this story up, wouldn't you want to put the people in power – the male disciples – at center stage?

The final exhibit in this case for me is the response of the chief priests. They learned from the guards that something had happened to the body, and they were afraid of what an empty tomb meant for them. This had to be explained, because if it couldn't be, then that would mean that Jesus really was the Messiah, and that the chief priests had bet their life savings on the wrong horse. So they devise this plan and pay the guards who were at the tomb to tell Pilate and everyone else that the disciples stole the body of Jesus while the guards were asleep. Thus, the resurrection is explained and Jesus stays dead.

But this conspiracy has some faulty logic of its own. Wouldn't the guards hear the disciples rolling away this huge stone? For the soldiers, the penalty for falling asleep while on duty was death. Would they all fall asleep at once? If they were asleep, how do they know the disciples stole the body? The disciples didn't have the courage to attend the crucifixion, but they had the courage to steal the body from a well-guarded tomb? For me it's easier to believe a man rising from the dead than it is to believe this theory.

I hear a lot of the chief priest's concerns in today's opposition to the resurrection, because sometimes believing the truth can be harder than believing a lie. Sometimes it's easier to believe in a lie than to face the truth and the implications it brings. For decades this country believed the lie that not all people were created equal, rather than face the truth that skin color doesn't determine a person's worth, and the implications of that truth for how we coexist. For the chief priests, it was easier to explain away the resurrection than it was to face the radical truth it presented.

Sitting here this morning, we are again confronted with an empty tomb. What's that mean? If we're looking for an explanation, if we're looking for proof, we won't find it in there. It's empty. So we have to look somewhere else. We can try to explain it away, you know. We can try to shout "Jesus lives" while writing off the reality of the resurrection. But for me, that shout rings hollow. I believe that to embrace and worship a living Christ, like the women did when he appeared to them, we have to live in light of the resurrection's real impact on our lives and our faith. If Christ is still dead in this story 2000 years ago, then Christ is still dead today.

But that's not what I see going on around me. I look at you, at this church, at the way God is at work in us – does the work of our Stephen Ministry point to a dead Christ or a risen Christ? Does the work of our Crisis Committee point to a dead Christ or a risen

one? Does the number of children we have learning about the Good News from faithful Sunday school teachers point to a dead Christ or a risen one?

The resurrection not only was real back then, but it is real today, and that reality compels us to live our lives with a resurrection perspective. Sometime life is so brutal, so unfair, that it ONLY makes sense when seen through the resurrection. Whether it's an illness of our parents, the loss of our job, or a battle with cancer, the empty tomb puts all our sorrow into perspective when we know that because Jesus lives, we can face tomorrow.

The concern with not believing the resurrection happened the first time is that we then don't believe it can happen again. We have no expectation of resurrection. If you don't believe in the resurrection, what are you expecting today, this most holy of days? To dress up, endure a sermon and then enjoy a nice meal? Are we expecting – yawn – another Easter? Or are we expecting resurrection? Are we expecting something important to come back to life – our dreams, our hopes, our strength to endure challenges, our broken relationships? A resurrected Savior is one that can bring dead things back to life – dead ends, dead opportunities, even a dead faith.

Ultimately, living with a resurrection perspective means heeding the words of the angel to the women at the empty tomb. He told them, "Go quickly to tell the disciples, 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you to Galilee.'" He has risen, and he is going ahead of you. Jesus is going on ahead of us, always ahead of us. And if we don't follow, we'll never know where he is leading us.

We can stay rooted in the past, fretting over the historical validity of the resurrection. We can stay rooted in our own past, fretting over things we've done, beating ourselves or others up for past sins. But Matthew's account makes one thing very clear without a doubt: Jesus is not back there.

Author John Purdy said, "God is not in the past, shut up in the tomb of our sins, our youthful indiscretions, our wasted opportunities, our shattered hopes and dreams. God is ahead of us – in our future, out there freeing us from our past, easing the pain, feeding the hungry, making for peace, washing the feet, raising the dead. God is gone ahead of us and he is out there waiting for us to get moving."

Do you want proof that Jesus rose from the dead? OK, I've got proof. Look around. You are the evidence of the resurrection. You are the proof that Christ is risen and alive and at work in this world. When you live with a resurrection perspective, when you allow the strength of Christ to be your strength and the love of Christ to be your love, when you endure and persevere and overcome through your faith in Christ, you become proof of his vibrant power, you testify to his living grace. When you expect resurrection in your life, your life becomes a testimony that shouts, "Jesus lives!"

The tomb is empty. Christ has risen. He's calling us forward as witnesses to his resurrection. Are we just going to sit here? Or are we going to get moving?